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Magdalene S. Varney

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Magdalene S. Varney
(Donor)

Dec. 1, 1998
(Date)

Oral History

Interviewed: Magdalene Varney

Interviewd by: Jeanetta Perry

Interview Date: December 1, 1998

Transcribed by: Jeanrtta Perry

I interviewed Ms. Varney on December 1, 1998. The interview focused on her life in rural Appalachia. She discusses strong, determined women in her family as well as familial abuse. She focuses mostly on education and its importance throughout life.

Ms. Varney did not hold back on her thoughts and feelings of hard work, family values and what determination will get you. Her life history involves living in the coal camps, highway development, education, and having a granny who happened to be a preacher in a hollow in Kentucky.

Ms. Varney's story is endearing, informative, and at times very amusing.

Magdalene: I found a pencil.

Jeanetta: Where did you find it?

M: Under the bed. That is where you find things here. I bet Lora has done took my shoes. Lora has never bought a pair of shoes in her life. I don't think, maybe one or two. She borrows mine. Well let's get this thing going.

I was born in the Appalachia mountains, way up a hollow. Have you seen the movie on Loretta Lynn? You can compare her family with my family. Let me tell you an interesting story about when I was born. Of course the midwives were around and I was breech birth and I only had about two minutes to live. My mother too. Her life was in danger. So when the doctor got there he said to her sister who was about 18 years old to do what he tells her and we will save your sisters life and the baby. He must have given her ether or something but anyway she said you got a beautiful baby. This past year her son (aunt) called me and asked if I would visit his mother in rehab. She had had a stroke. So here I am, taking care of this woman that brought me into the world. I thought that was so interesting. She would tell everyone that came in and went out about that. But at that time (inaudible).

I don't remember too much about pre-school age. The only thing I can remember is we had no toys. We would go over to my cousins house (inaudible) We would make dressers out of rocks and put one like that (horizontal) and one like that (vertical). Coughing makes first part inaudible... I had a baby doll. Then I would go swimming with my brothers. How we went swimming was my brothers would fill sacks full of dirt and things and put them in the creek.

Then I started school. It was a two room and I don't remember too much about it. But it was way up the hollow and in the winter I had to put on those long johns before we started off walking. (inaudible) the snow was so deep, maybe it was six inches, but to me it was deep, it could have been 24 inches (laughter).

Going back to my birth, my mother and father decided to name me Mary Magdalene. But they thought it would be too much for me to learn to spell, so in all their brightness and wisdom, they dropped Mary. I always wished it could be Mary instead of Magdalene. They do not pronounce it Magdalene. I changed it and gave it that pronunciation. They called me Magdalene (different phonetically). Everyone calls me Magdalene. But at college, the teachers had so much pronouncing and spelling my name, Magdalene, that I just changed it to Magdalene. Then after I married, I changed it to Maggie, but most of my neighbors here call me Varney. I just got rid of all the others (laughter).

But this is interesting. My father was a coal miner like Loretta Lynn's. He started in the mines at age 14. My mother was a very bright woman. She read a lot. She had a fifth grade education, but she was not an educated person. Not too long ago she came to my house and said she could remember a book, or story, or poem, from the reader. They called it the reader. So I had a set of the McGuthrie readers and we were going through it and she found it. It was something about a bird in the fifth reader. I said this is very meaningful, you take this book. The McGuthrie readers were a treasure of mine, but I gave her the fifth reader. When my father-in-law got sick I gave him the others to read until his death. The children divided things but I never did get them back. But that's okay, I don't need them.

Inaudible speaking

My mother and father had eleven children. The first baby died because my aunt told me it was just a weak baby, but it always had diarrhea. Let me tell you a funny story about that. This aunt told me that (inaudible) the baby always had diarrhea, always dirty diapers. Mamie, that's what they called my mother, told Clyde her brother to take the diapers out and put them. You know how they used to have a tub of water with a fire under it and they would put the clothes in it. That is where they used to go. Mamie told Myrtle to take them out. She said, As I went out the door I took those diapers, she called them s-h-I-t-t-y diapers, and rubbed it in his head. She said Mamie took a switch and whipped her. When Daddy came home he said they better never whip her again. I love that story because it shows determination.

From her family, she was the only one to go on to get her education. But my mother and father had eleven children. I always kind have resented the fact that a man and woman would marry, have eleven children, and no means to support them. What their method was to let the older ones go to work. It wasn't important to them that the boys went to high school, got their high school education, and it really wasn't important that the girls went. It was the fact that they needed to go to work and get money to support the family. But there was three girls and seven boys. Most of them was born at home

My mother was a very determined woman because to her it was very important to have a roof over her head and the children's and to have food on the table everyday.

The miners they did work for six months and then they would be on strike for six months. So we had a 21 acre farm, which I thought was huge at the time and we had all these vegetables that we canned. We killed a hog on (inaudible) legs. I remember very

vividly my mother would can sausage. You would turn it upside down and there would be a cup or two cups of grease that would seal it. We had in the basement, the meat, hanging to cure. On cold winter days you would go down there, get a gallon jar of blackberries, or a gallon jar of tomatoes and make tomato gravy and biscuits. Do you remember that?

Jeanetta: Yeas

Magdalene: Oh do you. At Christmas time each of us got one thing. I remember getting a doll with a yellow dress on. During the war we had peanut brittle but it was made of soybeans.

Later the unions came in. I really wasn't aware because my parents did not talk much about things that were happening. Even teachers didn't. Teachers focused on handwriting, and they would drill us on math like 3 plus 3 or 7 plus 4, and spelling words. We were not made aware of historical things. So after they got the union John L. Lewis' picture was hanging in our living room and then my father started making good money. At that time since he worked double shifts and triple shifts his health was failing him. He was injured in the mines and died with a brain tumor. I feel that tumor started twenty years before he passed away.

If he was alive today he would be arrested for child abuse and what do they call it... domestic violence. I guess he was so tired from working and working in the garden , killing hogs and killing cows, and milking cows, he was always angry, always upset. The way he was raised if the boys did not do what they should they would take a stick to them and that is what he did. He hit me a couple of times. I remember one time I had started working. I lied, I was 14, told them I was 16 got a work permit, but I was only 14. I had

bought at Murphy 5 and ten cent store a suit. It was red with black checks in it. Little tiny checks. Beautiful. I thought that was beautiful and a gray coat. I got in a like ten o'clock and he whipped me said that every woman was out whoring around and I resented that. I really resented that. He did not say where were you at girl, at a friends house or something. It was just the way he was. I left home again because I always stayed with my mother and cleaned house and the dishes for a family, can you imagine a kid washing dishes for a family of twelve? Heavens. I had a brother and I was washing dishes who came in with a gallon jar of green beans, wanted to cook those, and I chased him out of the kitchen. My father hit me with a miners belt and I left home. We lived up the holler and it was late. It was dark. I walked out of that hollow . That was the thing about those times, because at that time we could walk up and down that hollow and people would not bother us. Now Charles lived next door and if we were doing something wrong then he might take a stick to us. The parents looked out for the children. Big brothers looked out after other kids in the community seems like e do not have that now. I could be out there, I have been a widow now for 28 years and I can go out there in a ditch in the snow and no one stops to help me. Back then everyone helped everyone. I guess they had to do that to really survive.

Have you got... You see it was a rural section. I called it up the hollow. I love to refer to it as up the hollow. It was a community. They did have to work together for survival. It was like one man would have a car and they would all ride to and from work with him. One person in the community would have truck they would go on Saturday to get all of the groceries. I do not remember my father having an automobile and I have not been without one since my early twenties.

I had two sisters, one went to college but she was not interested. She just kind of enjoyed it. She was an intelligent girl. The other was a lot younger than I am and I hardly knew her. We associate. We call each other but to really know her, I do not. The brother that is next to me, it is really interesting. I do not think teachers taught to much except for writing and drilling us on math, flash cards. But we had one teacher, Jackie Runyon, and three of us had the same teacher. The three of us that had this one teacher went to college. One brother is a superintendent down in Ohio with the Board of Education. He is now retired. One brother had two Ph.D. and was working on another one in health administration. My masters degree is in education and counseling. Those other two brothers also took a lot of counseling classes and had worked as counselors. It could come from the childhood that we had. This one brother that is next to me, I remember we used to deliver papers early in the morning. I can remember being so poor that the soles would almost be off of our shoes. He taught me to wire the soles back on. You take a little wire and use it as a thread. We delivered papers. We had this aunt that could not read or write, she was the most beautiful woman that you ever saw. She was always sitting in a chair rocking, smoking a pipe. We would take her papers for meanness because she could not read. We would always take her papers. We were stinkers.

My brothers had this old horse and had this sled they would hook up to it. They would go around in it and pick corn from peoples corn fields. They had a pot-bellied stove on the back of it. They did not really let me go to often. Every now and again they would let me go. After I grew up, I figured it out. They had their girlfriends on that sled. But that was fun. My father demanded that this one brother, I will have to go back to

that, he demanded to bring in wood from the woods. So we would trek into the woods and one time it was so cold that we couldn't find any wood. We got the neighbors fence post (laughing). We would have to go to the coal mines, I don't know if it was what you'd call the coal mines, it was just like a little opening in the hill and there would be coal in there and we would go to that coal we burned it. A lot of times I would go to get that so my brothers would not get a whipping.

I think a lot of my fathers problems was the fact that my mother's father made whiskey. My father sold whiskey for him. So they were what you called bootleggers. It was really interesting, after my mother and father married, he old bring the whiskey over there for my father to sell. My mother didn't like it because I guess my father was an alcoholic. If it was today he would go to a hospital, but back then they didn't. She kept telling him not to bring it and he didn't stop. One time he brought the whiskey, I think it was a gallon, she drank it. He would never bring whiskey again. You talk about a determined lady, that woman was really determined. What she wanted she got. Her sister was telling me that the only thing she ever wanted was to marry a man that would take care of her. She said, my fathers name was Freeland, I always hated that name, and in school when they would ask me his name I would say Jack. I didn't want to be embarrassed. She said that Freeland would provide for her and would always take her to the doctor when she was sick. He pretty much did that. That's all she ever wanted was a man to take care of her.

Her sister, Myrtle, did go to college. She went, this is an interesting story, that she was telling me at the rehab place. She had had a stroke. She has her head down so it is hard to understand her and I would just listen and very seldom ever ask her a question. I

don't know if I have the details for the story but she said that when she was teaching they would ride horses from one mountain to the next to teach. She said she had a beautiful saddle bag and in one side she had her books and lunch and the other side she had a gun. One day they met a man. The man was going to do something to the women. She thought well, I'll give this horse a couple of good kicks on the behind and if that doesn't take care of that man then I'll just shoot my gun and blow his brains out. The reason that story is so interesting to me, I didn't know that teachers at one point carried guns and now children are carrying guns. Everything goes in a cycle. I had never heard that before. I could remember my mother telling us about teachers walking across the hill to teach with lanterns. They would have to leave that early to walk the hollows. That was such an interesting story to me. That was the only aunt that I had that was a college educated person. She still has a good memory.

I guess the reason that I went on to school was I loved high school. I loved those teachers. They were so great with us. They would laugh and talk and tell jokes. Maybe we didn't learn too much (laughter). My home EC teacher, her name was Joyce Dotson(?), she taught us how to take a pair of men's pants, rip them up, press them and make like a vest. That was really good for me, I didn't have the money to buy materials. I don't know if this was what she meant to do or if it was based on our needs. Then of course I was tired a lot from going to school to working in the drug store or the five and ten cent store of the evening. It started at thirty five cents an hour. Usually the paycheck was five dollars a week. With five dollars a week, I could buy a skirt, a blouse, and buy my lunch all week. A bottle of pop was five cents and a bag of potato chips five cents.

But there was a lot of times the bus would go by, they finally got a bus up there, and I would not have money to get on the bus. I would walk to school.

After I married, I didn't want to live with my husband's people and I did not want to live with my parents so I went to Pikeville College. That is a very rural section. There was only two buildings. That was the time when the house mother put you to bed and turned off the lights at ten o'clock, even though you were married. The professors would come over to the dorm and they would point out things we needed to study. We knew that would be on the test, if they would say we need to check on that, or need to review this, or we need... They were practically giving us the test. Then we went to church, to chapel everyday at 10:30 a. m. and we had a little log cabin that we would go to the meetings. I don't know what it was called. We would sing and think the rafters were going to come off of that building. We would have shows and plays and it was a barrel of fun. On Sundays we would go to Sunday school and they would be our Sunday school teachers. What I am today, Pikeville College made me the person I am today. I was there two years and my husband came home (from Navy). I became pregnant with twins. We were riding to school and we had a wreck and I had, I lost the twins.

After that we moved to Huntington to go to Marshall. That is where I did elementary education. I don't think the four years really prepared me to teach. In four years I didn't have a class in teaching reading. When I was working on my master's I took several classes on teaching reading. That helped a lot.

There was one lesson that I learned from my granny. She was a preacher back in the rural section of Burnwell(?), Kentucky. She always preached, this was her sermon, She had probably never been out of the hollow, she'd never been in a car, she'd never been on

a bus, but she always preached that God put everything on the earth, blessed it and called it good. I think I have carried that with me, she was a very strong preacher woman. If you look at this world and look at the people, there is good in all of them.

Even though if you look at , what is that singers name that I told you, Loretta Lynn's life and you look at the rural section I grew up in, there is a lot of good people there, a lot of good in those places. It has changed. It has changed a lot. It is not like when it was when I was growing up. I'm not that old, I'm still young. Even when I was a child they didn't have highways, you know they didn't have a road for a car to pass on. When we would go to my grandmothers we would go over to the river, we would yell across the river for Robert to bring the boat. To me it seemed like a canoe. He would take us over the river, like in that song Over The River And Through The Woods, then we would go to my grandmother's house. If you came to a creek, you walked a log to get over a creek. There were no roads. Now they have hardtop. It has changed quite a bit.

The greatest memory was on the thirtieth of May we wold go, my mother was a member of the Old Regular Baptist Church, and we would go to the cemetery, the family cemetery. I guess the church had those long tables. Everyone would bring food and they would preach all day. That is another thing I would like to claim back, because there was a fellowship that you had with the people.

I don't really remember sitting down and talking to my mother. She just didn't talk. My father didn't talk. One of the interesting things, I may have said this before, when I left home and stayed with my girlfriend, it was amazing to me that this mother and father would sit down at the table and talk to each other and laugh and eat. We didn't do that at my house. My mother was probably in the kitchen over a pot, my father was tired, and

the boys weren't well behaved kids. I guess they were a lot of times hungry, they would just be grabbing at food. A lot of times I would take my food and slip it to one of the brothers. Not that we were so poor that we didn't have nothing to eat but probably didn't have like here at this house, the grandkid would have the whole bag of potato chips, but back then we'd get a bag of potato chips and we'd have to share them with ten kids. You didn't get very much. A pint of ice cream here, my grandson would eat it all, but then you share a pint of ice cream with ten kids and you just don't get much. They wanted more and more. But my mother was very determined to have a home and to have food on the table. I don't remember sitting around and talking to her until she was maybe in her eighties. One good memory, one of the best memories, was when she took me to see a movie. The movie was *Gone With The Wind*. I was very impressed with Scarlet because she was a very determined lady and I think that maybe gave me some motivation because I could get out of the hollow. I could do better, if I would go to school, if I would learn to save, if I would learn quite a bit. The actress in that movie, I was just a kid, someone had a library in a company storehouse. I think they called that, what did they call that, the company camp, the coal mining camp. I checked out that book, an absolutely huge book. I read that book several times.

In elementary school, we didn't have an elementary school, junior high, and high school. We went pre-primer to eighth grade. I was a child up until the eighth grade, I played with dolls up until the eighth grade. Then we went to high school. Then and only then were we grown up. I think maybe we have pushed children too fast. Talking about historical changes, we have pushed children to grow up too fast and have taken away their childhood. I'm glad I had, I'm glad I was a child until the eighth grade. What is

that about the age of 14, about the time I left home. Then I became a big girl. They were explaining to me in high school, that you could wear a top hat and dance. You could buy a coke for a nickel a bag of chips for five cents. It was just fantastic. I also worked my way through high school and a lot of times I was very tired so it probably would have been better if I had not worked.

After I left Pikeville hospital, I went to Ohio and applied for a job. I had about 68 hours of college. My husband was taking me wherever that was, to the superintendent for an interview or the principal. It was a way out in a rural section, people were riding horseback. There was an advertisement back home so I told my husband to take me out of here. I went home and I called Mingo county. I got a job teaching in Gilbert, WV. I guess that was because I was determined to keep climbing, to keep making the change. I loved my husband, we took the two kids. The baby was probably a year old and my boy was about three. I stayed with his Grandmother and an aunt at Ben Creek over a big mountain. Oh my goodness, it was so scary when it was covered with snow. I started teaching in the fifth grade. The fifth grade boys were shaving. After being there for two or three years, I learned that they would retain the boys, just keep them around because they would get a hot meal. This as out in what I call the rural rural section, what I call boontown, boonytown, what do they call that, boondocks. Out in the boondocks. Then because of the medical services in Gilbert, we had to make a change. We had rented a room behind a little store with a stairway going down to the basement. I guess it was down in the rafters or something, my son found a can of lye and he said look sissy a can of snow. She licked it and I had to take her to the doctor. We sat there, we sat there, we sat there, me thinking my child was dying. He said for me to give her milkshakes. Then

the little boy,3, had the flu and we took him to the doctor up there in Gilbert. He was coughing and the doctor bawled me out for him not covering his mouth. Well I thought that they listened to the cough. I went home and that was the time when men wore white shirts. I starched those shirts and ironed them and packed my suitcase. I told my husband to go. I said don't come back until you get a job. So he came to Huntington and got a job because of St. Mary's and Cabell and the doctors down here. That's when I went to Marshall.

I taught 34 years in elementary education. I always had a real good relationship although I tried to be professional. Most teachers joined the NEA but I had joined the union. We had John L. Lewis at home so I had to be in the union. They did not like the union. Teachers change every year so I'm not talking about any one group. The different groups would always try to get 100 percent in the NEA and I guess I was too determined. I didn't want to join the union. I always had a good relationship. The last year I taught, we had this little boy, who was the only one in the family. The mother had an eighth grade education. She was there every day, morning and evening, checking on that child. She had circulated a petition for the schools to stop serving spaghetti. I did not get involved in that because of the child. You always stay away from a child like that. The teacher on duty came to me one day and said my children were out of control, my classroom. They were saying spaghetti sucks and they were laughing and screaming and the cook was crying. So when they came to the classroom, I asked them if that was true, if they used that word and upset the cook. They said yeah, what are you going to do about it? I was shocked but I stood there thinking and I said well let's write a note to the cook and just apologize for your behavior in the lunchroom. I never taught a lesson on

letter writing, if e needed to write a letter that was a teachable moment. So that is what I taught them, it was a teachable moment. So we wrote the apology. Then this woman wanted me, said that I had violated her sons constitutional right of free speech. The principal said (coughing I've got a cold) , the principal said that I had to write a letter. I knew they had been to a lawyer. So I wrote a letter, making myself look good, and my teaching in the classroom was great, saying in the letter that she could come to the classroom any day and have a conference. The principal called me in and said that the letter was fine but I needed to write it like this: I am sorry I violated your child's U. S. Constitutional Right of free speech. Sincerely, and he had a space for my name. I said no I can't sign that. I told him I will not be here tomorrow. I went to the union and I don't remember what I told him, if I was going to a lawyer or the doctor or whatever, made an excuse, took a personal day. I called the union and I asked if they were violating my civil rights and they said no. The principal was violating my right to teach, my freedom to teach. See I had made the choice to write the cook an apology. That was interesting, that was my last year of teaching. I had already retired when this happened, so I knew that they couldn't do anything to me. I told the principal that she had an eighth grade education, and she could not teach my classroom. I had a master's. I could teach fourth grade. This was just before retiring after 34 years of me teaching. When I retired I was very depressed because that was my place, to be a teacher. But then after I rested and got into gardening, I guess that was based on outdoor activities because we did have a farm.

I redid my garden and my landscape, sewing. I have seen the quilts that my grandmother has made. My mother used to take pants and just cut them into all shapes. I

guess today you would call that patchwork, she didn't call it patchwork, she just made a quilt. Even heavy coats like wool coats, those quilts were so heavy that they would really weigh you down. So I am doing a lot of that now.

So when you go back and think about growing up in the Appalachians a lot of the things that you see in the books are true. You kill the pig to sale it and get shoes. You sale the milk and the butter to trade for eggs. We used to do that. Trade lard you got at the company store for apples. You think about your childhood and you compare it with the way I have raised my children. I have not been mean to my children. Sometimes I can get into a situation where I am so tired and angry and upset, that's because I am a lot like my father. Now I can work around the clock. Today in the pretty sun I was outside from eleven to one raking leaves, cutting off lily tops, I am building a strawberry hill. You just pile up leaves and tree limbs and things like that then covering it with dirt and I have strawberries growing at the bottom. The strawberries will grow up and cover the hill making a strawberry hill one of these days. I guess I learned in the Appalachian hills to be a hard worker, to keep busy. That's interesting since the childhood wasn't a happy time. It's interesting that three of the family went to have a college education but also to have a degree in counseling. You know we did not know this, we did not know this until, my brothers advised me not to get a master's . That was when my husband was alive and had little kids. Then after my husband passed away, I went back to college. My brother came in from Texas and he had a degree in counseling. He was dean of a college at one time.

So when you talk about this good in all people like granny taught there is also good in all places. I think we need to look at people and see that potential. When I was teaching

everyone at Marshall taught me, you go into a classroom and you divide the class into group one, group two, group three, or a, b, c, or bluebird, redbird, or yellowbird. But you have the high intelligent children. (inaudible talking and background noises) They were taught this. You have like a reading class, you give an IQ test or achievement test, and you take, say, the top ten and that is the top group. The next ten would be the middle group. The bottom ten would be the ones who could hardly sit in the chair. They could choose their own name or they could, but you wouldn't say slow, middle. But after I retired and got out in this world, at the mall and in the stores, for example, I was in Lowes one day and I met this woman and I had had her kids. then I had Charlie, Charlie could barely speak. He was a first grader. I had him tested and put in speech. The next year she came in with Charlie, I had him the next year, and she said Charlie doesn't want to have speech. I said Charlie isn't old enough to make that decision. Charlie is now a contractor in Virginia building homes. He called me not long ago and his speech is great. She said to me, she said, Charlie had a speech problem and he's a little slow, I'm a little slow. He was in the slow group. Do you know what she does? Her husband is a contractor, you know these homes they have for show, she decorates those. I was buying, I was replacing curtain rods in my closet and I had the metal ones. She said you know if you get the wooden ones they won't sway down. So when you get out of that classroom and the way we were taught and look at everyone, everyone has a potential. My parents did not really encourage us to go to school. They could have cared less. We got a job me and my sister made ten dollars a week and that looked like big money to them. But I tell my grandson, you've got to have an education and you need to respect everyone in that classroom. A couple will be doctors, a couple will pump your gas, a couple will be

someone who you call to dig a ditch for a sewer line, a couple will be plumbers, one or two will be your postman, one a nurse. You know, I don't know how the school can do that because we were in that redbird, bluebird, yellowbird thing. I don't know how the schools can manage that. It's a task. It's a big one. I just don't know.

I don't think my children have been abused by me because I didn't want that kind of home my parents had. I maybe have gone a little in the opposite direction. I want them to use their own mind, make their own decisions, and I think I have worked more with that, them making their own decisions. Sometimes good sometimes they make bad decisions. But when they come home everything is not going to be in place like some homes are. I had a friend that she had a white velvet couch, when her son comes in he has to take his pants off to sit on it. I can't have anything like that. We have to have navy, brown, or dark green because you just never know who is going to be spending the night. Ken Hechler has spent many a night on my couch. I think its really a better situation than what I had and I hope they had a better situation than I have been able to provide.